

Woodrow Wilson's "Second Personality"

Ralph Raico

Wherever blame for the war might lie, for the immense majority of Americans in 1914 it was just another of the European horrors from which our policy of neutrality, set forth by the Founding Fathers of the Republic, had kept us free. Pašić, Sazonov, Conrad, Poincaré, Moltke, Edward Grey, and the rest – these were the men our Fathers had warned us against. No conceivable outcome of the war could threaten an invasion of our vast and solid continental base. We should thank a merciful Providence, which gave us this blessed land and impregnable fortress, that America, at least, would not be drawn into the senseless butchery of the Old World. That was unthinkable.

However, in 1914 the president of the United States was Thomas Woodrow Wilson.

The term most frequently applied to Woodrow Wilson nowadays is “idealist.” In contrast, the expression “power-hungry” is rarely used. Yet a scholar not unfriendly to him has written of Wilson that “he loved, craved, and in a sense glorified power.” Musing on the character of the US government while he was still an academic, Wilson wrote: “I cannot imagine power as a thing negative and not positive.” [1] Even before he entered politics, he was fascinated by the power of the presidency and how it could be augmented by meddling in foreign affairs and dominating overseas territories. The war with Spain and the American acquisition of colonies in the Caribbean and across the Pacific were welcomed by Wilson as productive of salutary changes in our federal system. “The plunge into international politics and into the administration of distant dependencies” had already resulted in “the greatly increased power and opportunity for constructive statesmanship given the President.”

When foreign affairs play a prominent part in the politics and policy of a nation, its Executive must of necessity be its guide: must utter every initial judgment, take every first step of action, supply the information upon which it is to act, suggest and in large measure control its conduct. The President of the United States is now [in 1900], as of course, at the front of affairs.... There is no trouble now about getting the President's speeches printed and read, every word.... The government of dependencies must be largely in his hands. Interesting things may come of this singular change.

Wilson looked forward to an enduring “new leadership of the Executive,” with even the heads of Cabinet departments exercising “a new influence upon the action of Congress.” [2]

In large part Wilson's reputation as an idealist is traceable to his incessantly professed love of peace. Yet as soon as he became president, prior to leading the country into the First World War, his actions in Latin America were anything but pacific. Even Arthur S. Link (whom Walter Karp referred to as the keeper of the Wilsonian flame) wrote, of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean: “the years from 1913 to 1921 [Wilson's years in office] witnessed intervention by the State Department and the navy on a scale that had never before been contemplated, even by such alleged imperialists as Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft.” The protectorate extended over Nicaragua, the military occupation of the Dominican Republic, the invasion and subjugation of Haiti (which cost the lives of some 2,000 Haitians) were landmarks of Wilson's policy. [3] All was enveloped in the haze of his patented rhetoric of freedom, democracy, and the rights of small nations. The Pan-American Pact which Wilson proposed to our southern neighbors guaranteed the “territorial integrity and political independence” of all the

signatories. Considering Wilson's persistent interference in the affairs of Mexico and other Latin states, this was hypocrisy in the grand style.[\[4\]](#)



Never elected to public office, Edward House nonetheless became the second most powerful man in the country in domestic and especially foreign affairs until virtually the end of Wilson's administration. Photo taken in 1920.

[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

The most egregious example of Wilson's bellicose interventionism before the European war was in Mexico. Here his attempt to manipulate the course of a civil war led to the fiascoes of Tampico and Vera Cruz.

In April, 1914, a group of American sailors landed their ship in Tampico without permission of the authorities and were arrested. As soon as the Mexican commander heard of the incident, he had the

Americans released and sent a personal apology. That would have been the end of the affair “had not the Washington administration been looking for an excuse to provoke a fight,” in order to benefit the side Wilson favored in the civil war. The American admiral in charge demanded from the Mexicans a 21-gun salute to the American flag; Washington backed him up, issuing an ultimatum insisting on the salute, on pain of dire consequences. Naval units were ordered to seize Vera Cruz. The Mexicans resisted, 126 Mexicans were killed, close to 200 wounded (according to the US figures), and, on the American side, 19 were killed and 71 wounded. In Washington, plans were being made for a full-scale war against Mexico, where in the meantime *both* sides in the civil war denounced *Yanqui* aggression. Finally, mediation was accepted; in the end, Wilson lost his bid to control Mexican politics.^[5]

Two weeks before the assassination of the archduke, Wilson delivered an address on Flag Day. His remarks did not bode well for American abstention in the coming war. Asking what the flag would stand for in the future, Wilson replied: “for the just use of undisputed national power ... for self-possession, for dignity, for the assertion of the right of one nation to serve the other nations of the world.” As president, he would “assert the rights of mankind wherever this flag is unfurled.”^[6]

Wilson's alter ego, a major figure in bringing the United States into the European War, was Edward Mandell House. House, who bore the honorific title of “Colonel,” was regarded as something of a “Man of Mystery” by his contemporaries. Never elected to public office, he nonetheless became the second most powerful man in the country in domestic and especially foreign affairs until virtually the end of Wilson's administration. House began as a businessman in Texas, rose to leadership in the Democratic politics of that state, and then on the national stage. In 1911, he attached himself to Wilson, then Governor of New Jersey and an aspiring candidate for president. The two became the closest of collaborators, Wilson going so far as to make the bizarre public statement that: “Mr. House is my second personality. He is my independent self. His thoughts and mine are one.”^[7]

Light is cast on the mentality of this “man of mystery” by a futuristic political novel House published in 1912, *Philip Dru: Administrator*. It is a work that contains odd anticipations of the role the Colonel would help Wilson play.^[8] In this peculiar production, the title hero leads a crusade to overthrow the reactionary and oppressive money-power that rules the United States. Dru is a veritable messiah-figure: “He comes panoplied in justice and with the light of reason in his eyes. He comes as the advocate of equal opportunity and he comes with the power to enforce his will.” Assembling a great army, Dru confronts the massed forces of evil in a titanic battle (close to Buffalo, New York): “human liberty has never more surely hung upon the outcome of any conflict than it does upon this.” Naturally, Dru triumphs, and becomes “the Administrator of the Republic,” assuming “the powers of a dictator.” So unquestionably pure is his cause that any attempt to “foster” the reactionary policies of the previous government “would be considered seditious and would be punished by death.” Besides fashioning a new Constitution for the United States and creating a welfare state, Dru joins with leaders of the other great powers to remake the world order, bringing freedom, peace, and justice to all mankind.^[9] A peculiar production, suggestive of a very peculiar man, the second most important man in the country.

Wilson utilized House as his personal confidant, advisor, and emissary, bypassing his own appointed and congressionally scrutinized officials. It was somewhat similar to the position that Harry Hopkins would fill for Franklin Roosevelt some 20 years later.

When the war broke out, Wilson implored his fellow citizens to remain neutral even in word and thought. This was somewhat disingenuous, considering that his whole administration, except for the

poor baffled secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan, was pro-Allied from the start. The president and most of his chief subordinates were dyed-in-the-wool Anglophiles. Love of England and all things English was an intrinsic part of their sense of identity. With England threatened, even the chief justice of the United States Supreme Court, Edward D. White, voiced the impulse to leave for Canada to volunteer for the British armed forces. By September 1914, the British ambassador in Washington, Cecil Spring-Rice, was able to assure Edward Grey, that Wilson had an “understanding heart” for England's problems and difficult position.^[10]

This ingrained bias of the American political class and social elite was galvanized by British propaganda. On August 5, 1914, the Royal Navy cut the cables linking the United States and Germany. Now news for America had to be funneled through London, where the censors shaped and trimmed reports for the benefit of their government. Eventually, the British propaganda apparatus in the First World War became the greatest the world had seen to that time; later it was a model for the Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. Philip Knightley noted:

British efforts to bring the United States into the war on the Allied side penetrated every phase of American life.... It was one of the major propaganda efforts of history, and it was conducted so well and so secretly that little about it emerged until the eve of the Second World War, and the full story is yet to be told.

Already in the first weeks of the war, stories were spread of the ghastly “atrocities” the Germans were committing in Belgium.^[11] But the Hun, in the view of American supporters of England's cause, was to show his most hideous face at sea.

Notes:

- [1] Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), pp. 126, 128.
- [2] Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973 [1885]), pp. 22–23. These statements date from 1900. Wilson also assailed the Constitutional system of checks and balances as interfering with effective government, pp. 186–87.
- [3] Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910–1917* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), pp. 92–106.
- [4] Even Link, *Woodrow Wilson*, p. 106, stated that Wilson and his colleagues were only paying “lip service” to the principle they put forward, and were not prepared to abide by it.
- [5] Link, *Woodrow Wilson*, pp. 122–28; and Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 531–34.
- [6] *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Arthur S. Link, ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), vol. 30, pp. 184–86. Wilson's gift of self-deception was already evident. “I sometimes wonder why men even now take this flag and flaunt it. If I am respected, I do not have to

demand respect,” he declared. Apparently the Tampico incident of two months earlier had vanished from his mind.

- [7] Charles Seymour, ed. *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin 1926) vol. 1, pp. 6, 114.
- [8] Edward M. House, *Philip Dru: Administrator. A Story of Tomorrow, 1920–1935* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1920 [1912]).
- [9] *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 130, 150, 152, and *passim*.
- [10] Charles Callan Tansill, *America Goes to War* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963 [1938]), pp. 26–28. Cf. the comment by H. C. Peterson, *Propaganda for War: The Campaign against American Neutrality 1914-1917*, (Norman, Okla., University of Oklahoma Press, 1939) p. 10: “The American aristocracy was distinctly Anglophile.”
- [11] Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), pp. 82, 120–21; Peterson, *Propaganda for War*; John Morgan Read, *Atrocity Propaganda, 1914–1919* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1941); and the classic by Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in Wartime* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1928). That unflagging apologist for global interventionism, Robert H. Ferrell, in *American Diplomacy: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), pp. 470–71, could find nothing to object to in the secret propaganda effort to embroil the United States in a world war. It was simply part of “the arts of peaceful persuasion,” of “Public Relations,” he claimed to believe, since “there is nothing wrong with one country representing its cause to another country.” One wonders what Ferrell would have said to a similar campaign by Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union.

This article is excerpted from Ralph Raico’s *Great Wars & Great Leaders: A Libertarian Rebuttal* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2010).

Copyright © 2012 by the Ludwig von Mises Institute. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided full credit is given.

Author(s):	Ralph Raico
Title:	Woodrow Wilson's "Second Personality"
Sources:	<i>Inconvenient History</i> , 6(2) 2014
Dates:	published: 2014-05-23, first posted: 2014-06-11 00:00:00

<https://www.inconvenienthistory.com/6/2/3297>